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FULBRIGHT QUERY ATTACKED BY RUSK

But Senator Rejects Charge
That Atomic Arms Debate
Is Disservice to Nation

By JOHN W. FINNEY
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 15 —

Secretary of State Dean Rusk has suggested that Senator J. W. Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, did a disservice to the country by raising questions about the possible use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam.

In a reply, Senator Fulbright rejected "the implication that the discussion of the subject of use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam is a disservice to the nation."

"I believe it would be a grave disservice to our country, in truth a disaster, if our leadership should so expose our troops in Vietnam as to require nuclear weapons to prevent their destruction," the Arkansas Democrat said in a statement today.

The Secretary of State and the Senate's chief foreign policy spokesman became involved in the angry public exchange after the State Department, without the advance knowledge or approval of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, took the initiative in making public a letter Mr. Rusk wrote to the Senator last Saturday.

The letter was in reply to

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one written by Mr. Fulbright last Friday inquiring, on behalf of the committee, whether the Administration intended to introduce nuclear weapons into South Vietnam.

The Fulbright letter noted that the committee had received a report from an anonymous source that Prof. Richard L. Garwin of Columbia University and other physicists who in the past had had some connection with the development of tactical nuclear weapons had been sent urgently to Vietnam.

As a result of the report, the letter said, several committee members suggested that the chairman ask Mr. Rusk about the nature of the Garwin mission and "ascertain whether tactical nuclear weapons have been or would be deployed in South Vietnam."

In a brusque, two-paragraph reply, Mr. Rusk said Dr. Garwin, as a Defense Department consultant, had gone to Vietnam "to discuss technical matters of a nonnuclear nature."

The Rusk letter, however, did not directly answer the question whether there were any plans to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam. Instead, by quoting a statement by the White House press secretary, George Christian, Mr. Rusk suggested that the Senator was being irresponsible and performing a national disservice by raising the question.

Simply 'Sincerely'

The Rusk letter said: "As George Christian said yesterday in response to a quest to use tactical nuclear weapons President had received a request to use tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam under certain circumstances: 'I think all of you know that decisions of this nature rest with the President. The President has considered no decision of this nature. I might add that irresponsible discussion and speculation are a disservice to the country, and I don't intend to say anything more about the subject.'"

Mr. Rusk ended his letter with a simple "Sincerely"—in marked contrast to the normal courtesies contained in a letter to the Senate committee.

The brusqueness of the letter, combined with its implied charges against the committee chairman, provoked considerable indignation among some other members of the committee.

Relations between Mr. Rusk and the committee were already strained, and it appeared that the effect of the letter might be to break off communications between the Secretary and the committee.

Senator George D. Aiken of Vermont, a ranking Republican on the committee, came to the defense of Senator Fulbright by saying the Rusk letter was "about as irresponsible as General Wheeler's statement that he wouldn't use nuclear weapons unless we begin to get the worst of it in the battle of Khesanh."

Suggests 'New Faces'

Without specifically suggesting that Mr. Rusk should resign, Senator Aiken said: "Maybe we need some fresh new faces downtown."

Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a statement to reporters yesterday said he did "not think nuclear weapons will be required to defend Khesanh" but then refused to "speculate any further" when asked whether the use of nuclear weapons was being excluded in the event the marine outpost in northwest South Vietnam was in danger of being overrun by North Vietnamese forces.

Senator Fulbright, in his statement after the Rusk letter was made public, also referred to the Wheeler statement, which he said "leaves the impression that, if needed to defend Khesanh, they [nuclear weapons] would be used."

"I believe that some other alternative for protecting our troops should be found," he said.

Observing that he was "profoundly opposed to having the United States destroy the worldwide psychological barrier against the use of nuclear weapons which has thus far existed since Hiroshima and Nagasaki," the Fulbright statement said:

"Since we are the only nation which has used nuclear weapons in anger to destroy the lives of Asian people, we have a very special responsibility not again to use these weapons, not in effect to take

the first step toward a general nuclear conflict in which incalculable destruction would result."

The tone of the Rusk letter was interpreted on Capitol Hill as a manifestation of the irritable mood of high Administration officials, including Mr. Rusk, over the adverse turn of events in Vietnam.

Senator Aiken said: "Things like that indicate that all is not going well for the Administration; if things had been going well, they would have tossed it [the Fulbright letter] off."

From the Administration side, however, came the explanation from State Department officials that the letter reflected indignation over the committee's apparent role in promoting what the Administration considers unfounded speculation that nuclear weapons might be used in Vietnam.

Instead of making private inquiries, department officials pointed out, the committee let out word last week that the chairman had sent a letter inquiring about the deployment of nuclear weapons to Vietnam.